

The Kenai Refuge from a newcomers viewpoint

by Tai Davis

This is a great place to work. On the trip driving up from Oklahoma and to this day, I was still awe-struck over the wonders of the wilderness. The seven day cramped drive was well worth it!

Now let me start off by saying that I love being outdoors, provided the bugs stay out of my boundaries, and I don't get dirty or wet—picture that! With enough gear, I can pull it off. I remember going crabbing in South Carolina a few years ago, where I had on rubber boots, plastic gloves, long pants/shirt, a hat, and a towel to block the sun. I didn't get dirty, but I was really hot. My co-workers assured me that in a couple of years I would get acclimated, but I am glad to now be in cooler country.

When I accepted my position as an Administrative Technician (Permits) at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, I was only given a little information about the area and what I'd be doing. Whatever the situation might be, I was coming to Alaska with bells on. I had wanted to live up here for 13 years, and it was time to do it. In 1998 I had a job opportunity up here, but I was discouraged from coming when I heard on the news that it was 40 degrees below zero and that a man was stranded in his home with no food.

The first day on the job at the refuge, my assignment was to go up in a plane to view the refuge from the air, so I would have some knowledge of the area when asked questions. Later, I was able to go rafting, something that I'd only done at water amusement parks. In the future, I plan to get out and do more things on the refuge. I really look forward to going camping.

I was able to see the end of summer, which to me was great minus in the smoldering humid temperatures I had experienced down south in Texas, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Georgia. While preparing for my move here, I conditioned my mind that I wouldn't have to be hot during the summer. Having solved the temperature issue, I now have to deal with the mosquitoes!

It was pretty cool seeing people catch all the gigantic fish. Where I come from in the South, if you were to tell someone you caught a fish that big—you'd better have a picture of it, otherwise you'd be accused

of telling a fish "tale." My two sons caught a few dolies. They swelled up with pride that they were able to bring home dinner. I was relieved they'd learned to clean them while spending summers in the country with my dad!

So far my first winter has been pretty mild. I've heard countless horror stories about winter harshness. The ice on the ground is pretty tricky, I'll say. Thank goodness for ice cleats! Some teenagers told me that I didn't need them, and that I needed to learn to do the Alaskan shuffle down, but "no thanks"—the cleats will do just fine. I look outside everyday and am so thankful to be able to experience this beauty. I was amazed to see the first snow in September, even though it didn't last long.

It's great seeing all the wildlife along the roads and so close to you. It reminds me of the Arbuckle Wilderness in Ardmore, Oklahoma, where you drive through a theme park and view animals from your vehicle. It's interesting to learn about hunting, fishing, trapping and much more. Growing up in the city, I used to think my dad shot our Christmas tree every year. Yes, he'd go hunting and would always come back with a tree, even if he wasn't lucky with his hunt. I still have lots of questions to ask anybody who will let me bug them.

Some people think the Wildlife Refuge is only law enforcement. Not true, our great team is made up of biologists, visitor services, volunteers, student conservation, administration, fisheries, maintenance, pilots, fisheries, fire management staff, and of course law enforcement. Each section working together helps our operation run smoothly.

There is so much to learn and do on the refuge. In the summer there are more programs running than during the winter months, but don't let that stop you, please come by and see us.

Winter programs include wildlife films shown on weekends on the hour from noon to 4 p.m.), Dec. 11/12 – Antarctica: Life in the Freezer (55 min.), Dec. 18/19 – A Mystery in Alaska (55 min.) Jan. 2 – Sled Dogs: An Alaskan Epic (55 min.); snowshoeing/walking trails, Winter Fun Day early February (guided snowshoeing tours/indoor activities). School field trips will start up early February. The ski trails open daily – sorry, no

dogs on the trails, please.

Visitor Center Hours: The refuge is open year round. Winter hours are weekdays 8:00 am to 4:30 pm and weekends 10 am to 5:00 pm. We will be closed for Christmas Dec 24-26 and New Years Dec 31- Jan 1. Questions? Please call us at Refuge Headquarters at

262-7021.

Tai Davis is experiencing her first winter in Alaska, working as the new permit specialist at the Kenai National. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.